

The Story of a Storyteller, Azalea Magazine, Spring 2021

<http://theazalea.com/the-story-of-a-storyteller/>

You'd be hard-pressed to find a recent graduate of any local school who has not at some point been entranced by renowned storyteller Tim Lowry. A household name in the Summerville community, the former educator and gifted performer has shared his talents with schools across the Lowcountry for a generation. His performances aren't limited to children, however. People of all ages have lost themselves in the time and place he creates for each story, told on stages throughout the country as he travels with his family to give audiences a unique experience with each telling.

A combination of theater, folklore, and creative writing, storytelling is both an art and a craft that dates to ancient times. From the epic tales of Homer's "The Odyssey" to Native American culture thousands of years ago, oral tradition is the common thread that weaves together the human experience, including the tragedy of loss, the adventure of discovery, and the hero's journey of Everyman. Br'er Rabbit and Ebenezer Scrooge, Odysseus and The Wide Mouth Frog, Gilgamesh and Enkidu all owe their immortality to prodigious storytellers. Stories are the reason we binge-watch, go – or went—to movie theaters, pay exorbitant ticket prices to see Hamilton, and indulge children for "just one more" before bedtime. They are the reason you picked up this magazine. Stories are a necessary part of our existence, connecting us with others and even ourselves. Tim Lowry's job is making those connections.

"Professional storyteller" is not a vocation most people think of when planning their futures, and Lowry's own story arc began at Bob Jones University in Greenville. There he enrolled as a theater major after his family moved to South Carolina from Kentucky in 1988. He became enthralled with an elective class in storytelling that would eventually put him on the path of a career performer. But first, he had to discover that path.

As a fine arts major, Lowry was required to also become a certified educator as part of the Bob Jones curriculum. He graduated with a certificate in speech education and then made his way to Charleston, finding employment as a carriage driver. In that role he captivated paying customers who were eager to hear the costumed guide spin tales of the South's history and mythology to the rhythm of a horse's gait. Wanting to learn more about storytelling and to spend time with like-minded artists, Lowry called the local library to inquire about local organizations. He learned of two area storytelling clubs and quickly became an active member of one of them, immersing himself in meetings and making connections. Before long, he had auditioned to join the South Carolina Arts Commission and was accepted, where he flourished in his talent while continue to earn his living as a city guide.

He later supplemented his income with a part-time teaching job at Goose Creek High School. As his network and reputation grew, he was invited to perform at local schools, including Summerville Elementary. It was there where Lowry forged a lasting friendship with then-principal Dr. Gene Sires, who quickly became one of Lowry's biggest fans. Lowry says that Dr. Sires was the only principal who would stay and listen to his every performance, no matter how many times he had seen his shows.

"He even had his favorite story, 'The Drainjo Man,' that he would demand I tell before I could leave. He would wave my paycheck over his head until I told it," Lowry said. When Sires died in 2009, Lowry was approached to tell the story at his memorial service, which he did, bringing comic relief to the ceremony. 'The Drainjo Man' was a story straight out of Lowry's imagination, originally told spontaneously to fill a small window of time at one of his shows. It became an instant crowd favorite, eliciting belly laughs from both school children and life-long educators. The tale is now a Lowry classic.

Dr. Sires was the person responsible for so many Summervillians' exposure to the storyteller. One day the beloved principal called Lowry into his office, telling him of his

plan to ask him to become the school's artist-in-residence thanks to a newly-earned grant. Yet, Sires recognized the effects of Lowry's stories on children and their desire to hear – and read – more. So Sires instead proposed using the grant money for Lowry to perform in local schools across the district, and before you could say, "Jack Robinson," there wasn't a child in Summerville who didn't get excited about a visit from Tim Lowry. Lowry was soon in high demand in schools beyond the Summerville town limits. But as anyone who has made a living off grants knows, the future was still uncertain. While attending a drama conference with his wife, Bonnie, also an educator, the couple had an epiphany: Lowry had grown in his art to the point where he might no longer have to depend on grants. He felt that his gift was a calling, and pursuing a calling is an act of faith. With strong faith in God, Tim's talent and each other, the Lowrys decided that he would become a professional storyteller full-time on his own accord. Bonnie had left teaching when their first daughter arrived. With this new decision, she became a full-time wife and homeschooling mother to their two daughters, and the entire family hit the road for performances near and far.

Lowry considers the national storytelling community an "extra family," as members have become close friends at national and regional festivals. The pandemic has temporarily eliminated this part of Lowry's life, sending him and other storytellers online for virtual performances rather than working with the energy and reactions of a live audience. When asked the difference between theater and storytelling, Lowry replies, "What is true of theater is truer of storytelling," meaning that the dynamic between performer and audience is different with each telling, as the audience is a partner in the story. "I avoid Zoom like the coronavirus," Lowry says of virtual experiences, which relegate his five-dimensional talent to a two-dimensional screen. Yet, the show must go on.

After months of figuring out how to adapt his craft to a digital setting, Lowry began creating videos, live streams, and even led a virtual theater camp. He also saw this down time as an opportunity to pursue an idea that had been percolating in his fertile

mind: with a publishing goal of February 1, Lowry plans to launch an online periodical called All The Year Round, which he describes as a family magazine based on Charles Dickens' own publication. The magazine will include everything from stories and writing to games, videos, and more. This project enables him to continue creating while exploring other outlets for his imagination with hopes of finding his online audience as robust as his live ones. While Lowry can't wait to resume his live shows, including his monthly performances at the Timrod Library, Lowry is excited and optimistic about his new venture. The present time allows him to employ his teaching skills by working with Bonnie in homeschooling their daughters while contemplating the post-pandemic world of storytelling.

Lowry's oral library ranges from timeless folk tales to original fiction and personal narratives. If you've somehow missed his masterful telling of Dickens' A Christmas Carol, then you now have a new goal for the future. No doubt, this past year will inspire new material, similarly to how recent years have been the muse for his popular tale, "Br'er Rabbit for President." While there hasn't been much to win applause over the course of a year marked by loss and isolation, if anyone can find a story worth telling imbedded in a time of contagion, it's Tim Lowry. After all, as his own hero, Dickens, says, "There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good humor."

ISC Welcomes Tim Lowry to Jonesborough, Johnson City Press, June 2019

https://www.johnsoncitypress.com/international-storytelling-center-welcomes-tim-lowry-to-jonesborough-for-storytelling-live/article_ae8655b9-8fef-5297-986a-01beea60d4ce.html

Early in his training, Tim Lowry faced a serious professional dilemma: should he become a serious thespian or go to clown college?

Unable to settle on just one thing, it was natural that Lowry eventually gravitated to storytelling. Now a humorist and historian known for his love of Southern culture and period costumes, his distinctive style comes from his appreciation of the performing arts.

Lowry has always nurtured a keen interest in high drama.

“When I was a theater major, I always got in trouble for playing directly to the audience,” he says. “The director would say ‘stop playing directly to the front row. You’re supposed to pretend they’re not there.’ But they are there! I think that’s what I like most about storytelling: the direct connection to the audience.”

Building that rapport became more important to Lowry than stage theatrics or the attention that one inevitably receives for riding a unicycle.

The storyteller will soon appear in Jonesborough as a featured performer in the International Storytelling Center's "Storytelling Live!" series, an artistic residency program that invites different performers to Jonesborough through the end of October.

Lowry's weeklong residency (June 18-22) will include daily performances, Tuesday through Saturday, at 2 p.m. Tickets are just \$12 for adults. Seating is first come, first served, and Lowry's performances frequently sell out in advance.

In addition to stories about Southern culture and folk tales from around the globe, Lowry has a special affinity for vivid episodes from American history. He's especially fond of the great frontier.

Over the years he has developed a wide collection of stories from the western United States, which he describes as "colorful, bright and big with American spirit."

The 2019 "Storytelling Live!" season will feature a variety of special events, including children's concerts and evening shows. Lowry will lead the year's first workshop, "Using Story for Effective Communication," on Thursday, June 20.

The interactive two-hour event (9:30-11:30 a.m.) will explore how stories work as a communications tool in life and business, including everything from PTA meetings to political campaigns. Advance registration is strongly recommended.

The workshop is designed for anyone who's interested in using storytelling to communicate their purpose, vision, values, and goals in stories instead of soundbites. Lowry plans to cover ground such as work presentations, advertising campaigns, social media and even conversational stories.

Discounted \$11 tickets for matinees are available for seniors, students, and anyone under 18, and heavily discounted season passes are still available. Exclusive local discounts are available to all ticket holders.

Ticket stubs will earn a 10% discount on same-day dining at Main Street Café (lunch only), Olde Towne Pancake House, Texas Burritos & More, Krazy Krepes, Jonesborough Barrel House, the Icing on the Cake (lunch only), and the Corner Cup. Additionally, Boone Street Market is offering 10% off prepared meals and 5% off any other purchase.

The premier sponsor of "Storytelling Live!" is Ballad Health. Additional program funding comes from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Tennessee Arts Commission, the Niswonger Foundation, Eastman Credit Union, the Mooneyhan Family Foundation, and

Food City. Media sponsors include News 5-WCYB, FOX Tri-Cities, Tri-Cities CW, Johnson City Press, Kingsport Times-News, Herald & Tribune, and Cumulus Media.

“Storytelling Live!” will bring more than two dozen storytellers to Jonesborough through the summer and fall.

The International Storytelling Center is open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Saturday. For more information about “Storytelling Live!”, including the full 2019 lineup, or to purchase tickets and season passes, visit www.storytellingcenter.net or call 800-952-8392.

Lowry Returns to Storytelling Festival, Troy Messenger, January 2018

<https://www.troymessenger.com/2018/01/26/lowry-returns-to-storytelling-festival/>

Nationally acclaimed storyteller Tim Lowry has been telling stories of the people, by the people and for the people for 15 years.

From the South Carolina Lowcountry to the top of a California volcano, Lowry has performed in just about every type of venue imaginable.

He is equally at home in an Appalachian log cabin, a Mandan wigwam, a New York theater, a Texas ranch house or a South Carolina plantation. And, he is right at home at the We Piddle Around and Trojan Center theaters here in Pike County.

Lowry is a return performer at the Pike Piddlers Storytelling Festival and, as all of those who return, they do so by popular demand.

“When I saw Tim Lowry for the first time, I knew we would have him back,” said Johnny Steed, who emcees the Pike Piddlers Storytelling Festival held annually the last weekend in January and sponsored by the Brundidge Historical Society. “His first set he came on stage in a seersucker suit and preached a fire and brimstone sermon that hit on every sin known to man. The next time he was on stage he told stories about a group of African-Americans in South Carolina that have a unique culture that is directly related to West Africa. The language they speak is called Gullah and Tim Lowry can and does speak Gullah.”

Steed said Lowry brings a bit of history to his performance and a lot of laughter.

“As soon as he steps on stage, he’s got you,” Steed said. “You won’t fall asleep. In fact, you’ll have to hold on to your seat to keep from being blown away.”

Lowry is a proud ambassador of the Sweet Tea Trail in Summerville, South Carolina. And, he is a true Southern gentleman.

“Tim Lowry makes himself available to the audience,” Steed said. “He’ll be out in the crowd. He enjoys talking with people and people really enjoy him.”

Lowry will join Donald Davis, from Okracoke Island, Josh Goforth from the mountains of Western North Carolina and Elizabeth Ellis from the Lone Star State on stage at the We Piddle Around Theater in Brundidge (Friday, sold out) and the Trojan Center Theater on the campus of Troy University on Saturday.

Tickets are available for the performances at the Trojan Center Theater on Saturday at 10 a.m. (\$10), 2 p.m. (\$15) and 6:30 p.m. (\$10). For tickets, call 334-344-9427, 334-685-5524 and 334-670-6302. Tickets are available at The Messenger on South Brundidge Street.